March - April 2004 ▪ Vol. 26, No. 2

Kansas Preservation

Newsletter of the Cultural Resources Division ▪ Kansas State Historical Society

The tension between modern and traditional church design in the twenty years after World War II left a powerful, lasting legacy on the ecclesiastical landscape of Kansas and the nation.

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When Traditional Could Be Modern

Religious Buildings in Kansas After World War II

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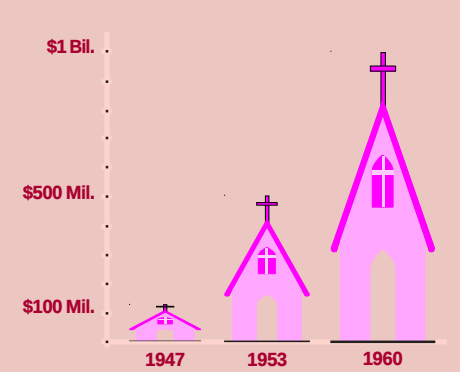
The small white country church may be the stereotypical icon of religion in Kansas, yet religion in Kansas has taken place in the sometimes awkward combination of modern and traditional church styles implemented after World War II. These diverse architectural styles reflect the tensions and contrasts of the society that produced them.

While the years from 1945 to 1965 have the reputation of embracing of all things modern, the era actually had both confidence in the latest in technology and devotion to established traditions. Worshipers said ancient prayers or sang familiar Gospel hymns from pews that had angled backs and padded seats. Revival Styles remained popular even as designers adapted the pared-down International Style to the ancient basilican model of church design. Severe geometric designs in abstract stained glass windows merged with the round church design from late antiquity. Even the commentaries from the time were mixed: some critics praised the contemporary lines of the latest designs while others scoffed at what they called the "barn and silo" approach to building.

The decades following World War II marked one of the great ecclesiastical building booms in American history. In 1947, Americans spent $126 million on church construction. By 1953, that figure was $474 million. Two years later, that amount nearly doubled to $734 million. By 1960, Americans spent more than $1 billion on church construction nationwide, roughly 2.5 percent of all money spent on privately financed construction. Kansas was part of this movement as well. For example, the Methodists, the largest single religious group in Kansas during this time, spent nearly $1 million on church construction in 1955, an 800 percent increase from what they spent in 1940. Other groups and denominations were just as active.



Church construction spending nationwide soared in the post-war era.

Baby Boomers and Suburbs

Economics and demographics drove a lot of this construction. The generation that fought in World War II had settled down and started raising families. These growing "baby boom" families required a wide range of services, including those for spiritual needs. The combination of growing congregations and postwar prosperity meant churches could support major building programs.

First Presbyterian in Topeka was a good example. In 1950 *The Christian Century* did a feature story noting how the church worked to include young families into the life of the congregation by, among other activities, remodeling the old Sunday school auditorium into a collection of classrooms. The congregation then launched a $230,000 building program to add a new wing for offices, a chapel, a library, and a recreation room.

In the nation's larger cities, the development of suburbs

(Left) While the main sanctuary of First Christian in Wellington is in a classical design from the early twentieth century, its education wing has the simple lines, plate glass, and metal window frames from the 1950s.

(Below) Evangelical and Pentecostal congregations emerged throughout Kansas after World War II. Sublette's Southern Baptist Church is one example of the structures these congregations built.

offered a new mission field for the mainline denominations. The common paradigm involved churches catering almost exclusively to residents of a given neighborhood. These congregations consisted of relatively small groups who chose their house of worship because they happened to live nearby or because it was of a particular sect or denomination that potential members sought out.

The ability to drive to the church of one's choice rather than walk to the closest also freed congregations to locate where land was cheaper. Because parking was a factor, lots had to be bigger, encouraging construction in new areas or on the outskirts of town where there were fewer existing structures to contend with. Whether intentional or not, the result was congregations made up of the self-segregated social and cultural groups that were the byproduct of the suburban experience. For Kansas, the expansion of churches into new neighborhoods was especially pronounced in cities such as Wichita, Topeka, Salina, and the Kansas City area.

For the rest of Kansas, however, different patterns were at work. Smaller towns did not develop suburbs. Yet after World War II, rural Kansas also experienced a period of prosperity, allowing existing congregations to remodel or replace their older sanctuaries. This remodeling took place in three main forms. The first was to retain the existing sanctuary but add on a new "education wing." The second was to add on a new sanctuary and remodel the old one into some combination of parish hall and classrooms. The third was to completely replace the old sanctuary by either demolition or relocation. As in larger cities, the new construction sometimes took place in stages, with the congregation first constructing an all-purpose building that served as sanctuary, classroom space, and parish hall. Once (or if) finances permitted, a second phase to complete the main worship space began. In all these cases, modern buildings implied status and conveyed the image that these were dynamic prosperous congregations fully part of the postwar boom.

Another reason for church construction in Kansas was the growth of religious traditions that were relatively new to large parts of the state. Into the 1930s, mainline denominations prevailed in Kansas. Starting in the 1940s, Kansas experienced a substantial growth of Evangelical and Pentecostal congregations such as the Southern Baptists, Churches of Christ, Church of the Nazarene, Church of God in Christ, and Assemblies of God. These traditions expanded in Kansas with the "Southern Diaspora," the migration of both white and African American populations from the South. For example, in 1936 U.S. census statistics listed six Southern Baptist churches for the entire state. By the 1950s, there were Southern Baptist congregations in two-thirds of the counties in Kansas, with over a dozen in the Wichita area alone.

Sometimes, new congregations emerged in the wake of a revival or were the result of intentional mission work. Sometimes, existing congregations split over personal or theological issues, resulting in a community supporting a collection of relatively small congregations instead of a single, large one. When resources permitted, these congregations either constructed their own buildings or moved into older vacated churches.

New Religious Traditions

Although congregants still dressed up to go to church, buildings from this period reflected the era's embrace of family-oriented informality. The World War II generation respected tradition but was put off by the stuffiness of earlier eras. To reach these young families, churches had to make things informal, contemporary, and relevant. In terms of church decoration, this meant that pews, pulpits, and altars remained but featured odd angles, simplified forms, stylized

First Baptist Church in Kingman, which was dedicated in 1953, is a vernacular structure that combines mock buttresses and a Gothic arch over the entrance with the square nine-pane windows common to buildings in the middle of the twentieth century. The light brick was another common feature of mid-century construction.

symbolism, and near-ubiquitous blond woodwork. The tone was sharp, angular, crisp, and even severe. At the time, it seemed refreshingly light and airy in contrast to the ornate designs of the nineteenth century or the institutional respectability of the early twentieth. Side windows became narrow rectangles filled with clear glass or stained glass arranged in regular squares or abstract patterns. Asymmetry showed up in a variety of ways, from off-centered chancel crosses to naves featuring one side wall made up of windows and the other of masonry.

Outside, there had to be ample space for parking as more and more people drove to services. As with homes, religious buildings constructed after World War II tended to sit back from the street, surrounded by lawns and shrubbery. Even small churches could exist in almost park-like settings if space and resources permitted. In a number of instances, congregations acquired a large parcel of land so that they had room to expand once their membership grew.

As with the rest of the nation, there were a great variety of styles and designs for postwar religious architecture in Kansas. Some congregations continued the tradition of revival styles, especially those that evoked a particular cultural or historical tradition. Others opted for adaptations of the International Style, often applying the design to familiar interior arrangements. Still others experimented with unique combinations of roof lines and floor plans mixed with elements of earlier styles. Moreover, countless vernacular forms took elements from these and other designs to make even humble buildings look up to date.

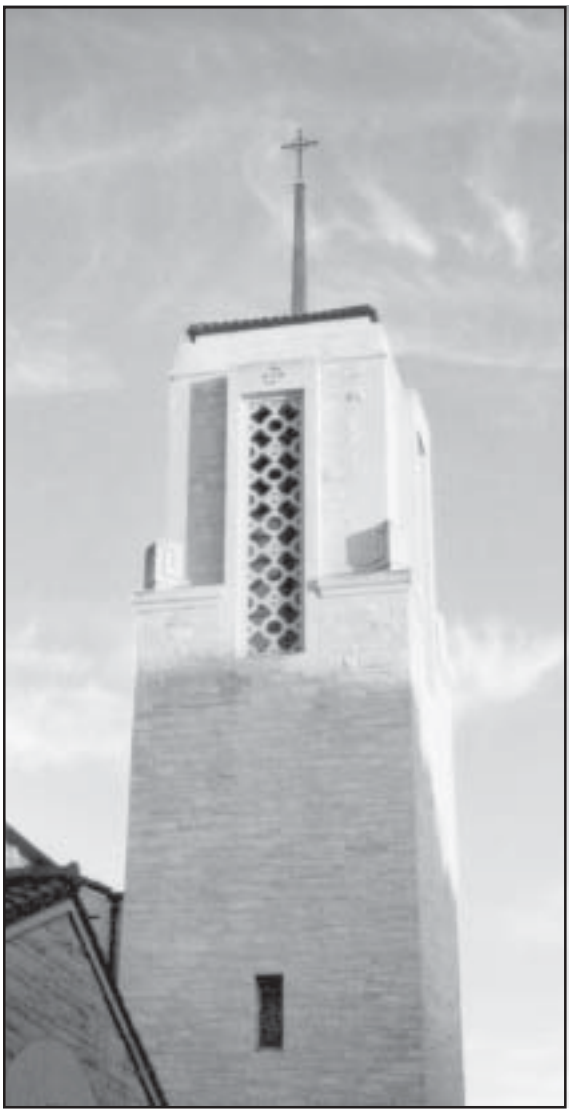
Terminology was just as complex as the diversity of styles, in part because the popular culture resonated with the word "modern" but was vague about what that term meant. Popular writers tended to use "modern," "modernistic," or "ultra-modern" to describe any design or building that was not a revival. Some called these designs "functional" or "contemporary." Others were specific in using Modern to refer to the International Style. Because it is hard to talk about this era without using the phrase modern, for this essay, "Modern" refers to the International Style while "modern" is a more general term to describe the period and its attitudes.

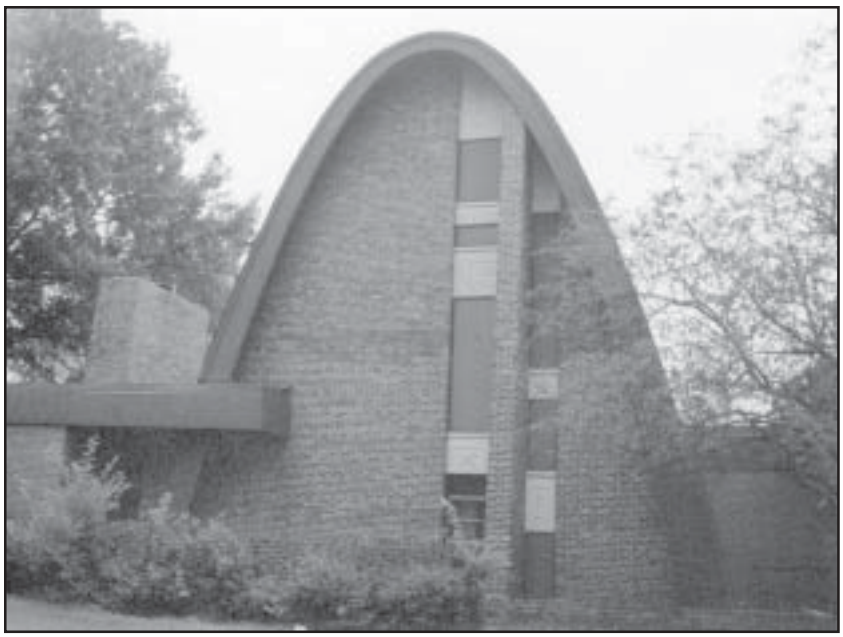
Revival Continues

One approach to religious building was to continue the revival styles of the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s. As before, Gothic Revival, Colonial Revival, and Romanesque Revival were popular. The use of revival styles was especially pronounced in the late 1940s and early 1950s, so much so that a 1947 article in *The Christian Century* wondered why America was so intent on being a church museum.

In a society that was undergoing so many changes, a connection to tradition was reaffirming. Worship surroundings that evoked Medieval Christendom, the Mediterranean of the early church, or the Colonial society of the Founding Fathers offered a sense of stability. To many, that was the way a religious building should look. At first, these were different from earlier structures in only minor areas such as stylized decoration, abstract patterns in stained-glass windows, or windows with metal frames instead of wooden ones.

Revivalism also reaffirmed ties to ethnicity or culture. Books of the time, such as Will Herberg's *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* or Hartzell Spence's *The Story of America's Religions*, described denominational differences as more





(Left) Not all religious structures built after World War II were "ultra-modern." Revival styles continued as in this case of the Romanesque Revival East Heights United Methodist Church in Wichita.

(Above) The St. Mark Church of God in Christ in Wichita began as the home of Holy Cross Lutheran Church. The sanctuary featured a barrel vaulted roof down the nave. The asymmetrical arrangement of windows shown here was a popular feature for religious buildings of this era.

matters of tone and heritage than theology. While exceptions certainly existed, certain Revival styles tended to be more common with certain denominations. For example, ever since the Oxford Movement brought a renewed interest in Medieval liturgies and worship to the Anglican community, Episcopalians nationwide, Kansas included, tended to favor Gothic Revival for their churches. Presbyterians and Lutherans also tended toward the Gothic Revival. The Disciples of Christ and Evangelical groups tended toward Colonial Revival or vernacular adaptations that included brick with white trim. Methodists, with their wide spectrum of theology and practice, were among the most diverse in their embrace of Revival Styles, featuring everything from Medieval to Classical.

Kansas was very much in keeping with the national trend. Wichita's College Hill neighborhood boasted Revival style structures including the Romanesque Revival East Heights United Methodist Church and Colonial Revival Second Church of Christ, Scientist. The Revival look extended throughout Kansas, showing up in St. Thomas Catholic Church in Stockton and Salina's first Missouri-Synod Lutheran Church, Trinity Lutheran.

The International Becomes Commonplace

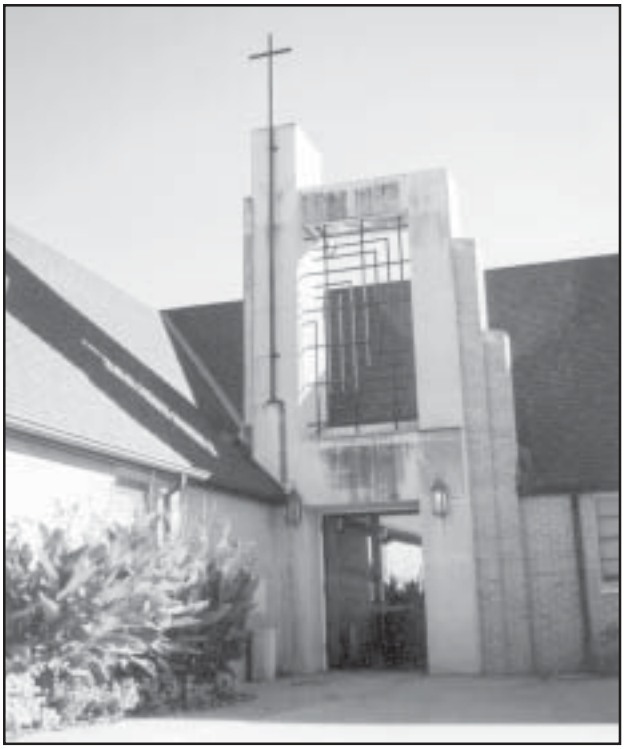
Although revival styles never fully went away, by the late 1950s they faced growing competition from other interpretations of religious architecture. In the wake of the Depression and World War II's devastation, European church architects tended to break with revival designs in favor of new approaches. In the United States, architects such as Eliel and Eero Saarinen and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe were part of a larger movement to incorporate expanses of glass, metal, and laminated wood into contemporary ecclesiastical buildings.

By the 1950s, the International Style–with its asymmetry, lack of ornament, and extensive use of curtain walls made up of windows–gave architects and church builders a rich architectural language to work with. Devotees of the International Style felt that the mere imitation of earlier architecture was inappropriate for citizens of the twentieth century.

Architecture needed to show the simplicity and beauty of a structure and not hide it behind fake classical columns or Gothic arches. Buildings had curtain walls of glass to open up the interior to the outside. The materials that made up trusses, walls, ceilings, and floors were part of the overall appearance. Wood looked like wood, not faux marble. Walls reflected the earth tones of bricks rather than the white of plaster. Windows could be clear expanses of glass open to the outside, although for religious buildings, abstract designs of stained glass were also common. In an age when Abstract Expressionism captivated the art world, stained glass windows moved away from depicting images in favor of simple shapes of various colors.

The structure of the building itself became a major part of the design. Architects expressed some of their greatest creativity in designing roofs. Roof pitches ranged from flat to shallow to steep. Some churches sported adaptations of the gambrel roof while others swooped upward with graceful curves. Some used the A-frame arrangement, reducing or even eliminating the side walls. Some structures featured domes, barrel vaults, or hyperbolic paraboloids. Laminated wood trusses framed interior space.

Roof arrangement was due in part to style. There seems to have been a trend for mainline denominations such as



(Above) The striking entryway to Redeemer Evangelical Lutheran Church in Atwood connects the sanctuary with the education wing.

(Right) After World War II, Overland Park Presbyterian added a new sanctuary to its Gothic Revival building that dated from 1930. The interior is typical of many religious structures from the time with the nave walls being mainly glass and the focal point a large plain cross on the chancel wall.

Episcopalians, Lutherans, Presbyterians and Disciples of Christ to prefer steep roofs or at least high interior spaces when possible. Cost may have played an even greater role. A number of small congregations started out in modest buildings with shallow roofs, but later added a larger sanctuary with a more imposing roof and interior space.

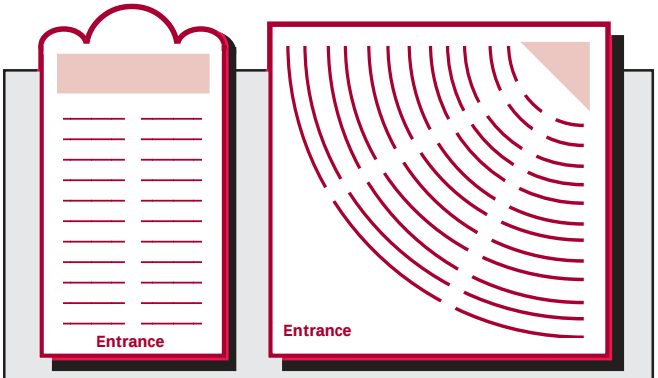
Although executed in contemporary materials and designs, the model for many of these churches was the Gothic cathedral with its soaring interiors and walls of stained glass. Inside, there was an emphasis on height and the worshiper's eye was directed upward onto the chancel wall, which in the 1950s tended to feature a single large cross or crucifix. This symbol, not an ornate altar, was the focal point of attention for these new churches.

Regardless of denomination, the churches of the 1950s tended to use the basilican layout: a rectangle entered though a narthex or vestibule at one end with rows of pews separated by a central aisle in the nave facing down to the chancel and altar. For Catholic churches this had been a standard design for centuries; however, for Protestants in the 1950s the popularity of the basilican arrangement represented a return to earlier forms. Since the days of John Calvin, many Protestant denominations favored the meeting house arrangement of pews set around a central pulpit, often with side galleries above. The Puritans brought the meeting house idea with them to New England and Evangelical groups popularized aspects of the layout as they moved west to places such as Kansas. By the early twentieth century, the "Akron Plan," with side classrooms opening out onto a central auditorium, adapted the meeting house idea to Progressive-era Christianity. By the 1950s, however, the meeting house was out of fashion for many Protestants and the basilican model became the standard image for what a church should look like.

The basilican style better suited worship practices in the middle of the twentieth century. Leaders in several Protestant denominations, including Methodists, the Reformed churches, and Lutherans, fostered a renewed interest in liturgy and sacramental worship. The basilican model had originally developed to focus on the sacrament of the altar, making this ancient form of worship space a fitting choice for new construction.

However, while earlier models of ecclesiastical design favored the main entrance facing the street, the entrance to religious buildings in the 1950s was just as likely to be at the intersection of the sanctuary and the education wing. This was a logical change since worshipers were more likely to enter from the nearest parking space than from the sidewalk in front. In some cases, religious buildings had to have two entryways: one that faced the street and one that faced the parking lot. In this case, the narthex became more of a breezeway connecting the sanctuary and education wing. In other cases, the main entrance was opposite the side facing the street, on what prior generations considered the back of the building.

In some churches the chancel wall faced the street and became the structure's most visible face. Chancel walls ranged from triangular to trapezoidal in shape and could be plain; sport an abstract design in the brick, glass, or stone; or feature a large, simple cross.



The two basic floorplans described in this article are the Basilican (left) and variations of the "Akron Plan" or meeting house design (right).

The edge of the roof was often at an angle, with the eaves at the peak extending farther out from the eaves lower down.

Outside, steeples were still standard features of church design but were themselves stylized into narrow sharp points topped by a cross. Sometimes the cross was separate from the main building with its own supporting structure.

By the early 1950s, congregations in Kansas started embracing these features. An early example was the modest asymmetrical chapel of Christ Lutheran Church in Wichita. It was a featured design in the December 1953 edition of *Architectural Forum*, the article focusing on how inexpensive the design was at $23,700. The design later proved to be portable as well when the congregation moved the building to a new site in the early 1960s.

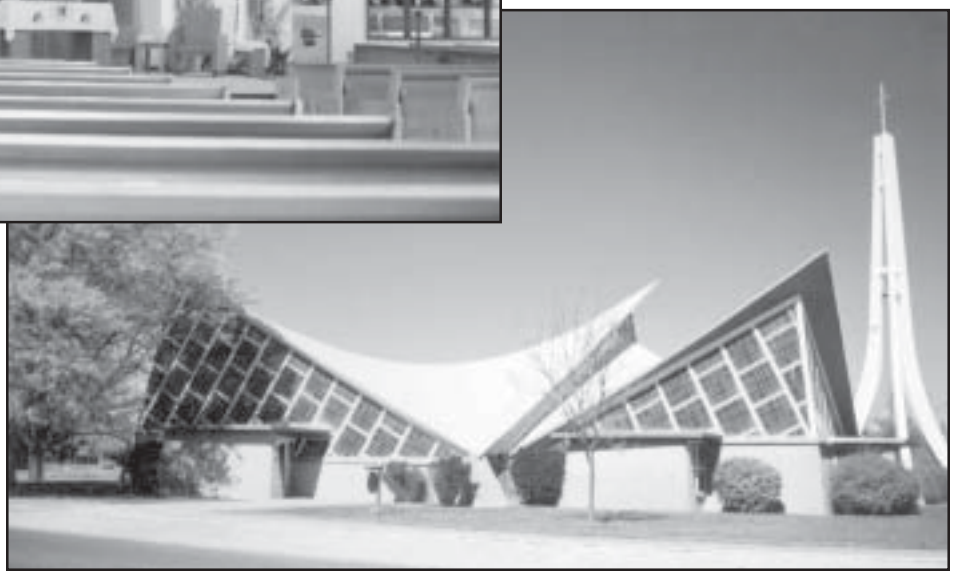
By the middle of the 1950s, churches that seemed "ultra-modern" to the general public sprouted up across the state, including St. Matthews Episcopal Church in Newton. Some congregations, like Overland Park Presbyterian, or First Methodist in Atwood, kept their original building but added a large new sanctuary. Even Jewish congregations, such as Wichita's Congregation Emanu-El built new structures with similar décor and construction. Although circular in layout, Temple Emanu-El's interior has seating facing a *bimah* (raised platform where the service is conducted) at one end.

In Kansas, several Catholic structures stood out as particularly striking interpretations of 1950s design. From St. John the Evangelist in El Dorado to St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Yates Center, adaptations of Modern church architecture appeared in Catholic churches across Kansas.

(Top Left) The United Methodist Church in Atwood shows the contrast between a worship structure from the early twentieth century on the right and a 1950s-era addition.

(Top Right) Dating from 1961, the sanctuary of Temple Emanu-El in Wichita is round. The space is quite tall and the wooden sides emphasize that height. This emphasis on height, along with the simple wooden furnishings, was common for religious buildings since the 1950s and 1960s.

(Bottom Right) St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Yates Center is an example of how structures in small Kansas communities reflected some of the trends found nationwide. The gable with its prominent peak and asymmetrical arrangement of windows and crosses mark the structure as postwar, in this case, dating from 1955.



The design of the Mary, Queen of Peace Catholic Church in Ulysses used hyperbolic paraboloids for the roof, concrete for the walls, and stained glass for the spaces in between. The floor plan is more of an auditorium than a traditional basilican arrangement.

Overall, the distinctions in architecture that once marked different denominations had diminished. Inside and out, these buildings were nearly indistinguishable among denominations. They could be Catholic, Lutheran, or Presbyterian but could just as easily be Baptist, Methodist, or even Assembly of God. Gone were the ornate decorations of Catholicism or the side galleries of the New England meeting house tradition. In an age when the ecumenical movement worked to reduce denominational friction–and where religious tradition was, on the surface at least, more about heritage than theological differences–such interchangeable architecture made sense.

A Return to Community

As the 1950s transitioned into the 1960s, designers started to move away from the basilican design in favor of different floor plans. Although architects had been experimenting with alternate conceptions for religious architecture since the 1940s, it was not until the 1960s that the many of their ideas appeared in moderate or small structures nationwide. These worship spaces de-emphasized the hierarchical nature of basilican structures in favor of layouts that emphasized community. For example, the altar and pulpit could be in the center of the worship space, with seating arranged around the edges facing inward.

Just as many Protestant groups were embracing the basilican layout of the early Catholic tradition, Catholic congregations were taking up the auditorium arrangement of Protestant worship. To make Catholicism more approachable, a number of liturgical changes took place. In the wake of Vatican II's reforms, designers placed altars away from the back wall out far enough for the priest to face the congregation. For older churches, the move was sometimes difficult to implement; throughout the Catholic Church, tables appeared in chancels and even naves to accommodate the new liturgy. Elegant altar rails came out and Victorian era decoration disappeared under coats of paint. While awkward for older structures, the change in liturgy was well suited to the post-Vatican II churches with variations on the auditorium arrangement of seating arcing around the central worship space. Even small Kansas parishes embraced dramatic designs. Mary, Queen of Peace Catholic Church in Ulysses featured a worship space arranged diagonally. The roof consisted of a series of hyperbolic paraboloids with abstract stained glass windows arranged in angled rows underneath.

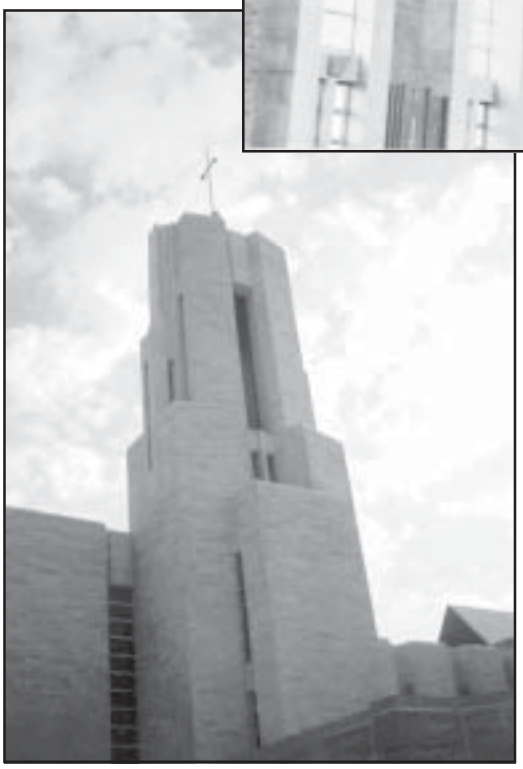
The 1960s were a time of experimentation in the design of religious buildings, a trend that became even more pronounced as the decade unfolded. Both Catholic and Protestant churches broke with the simple basilican box to construct churches from a wide range of floor plans. 1960s churches, such as First Methodist Church in Wichita or First Baptist in Coffeyville, tended to emphasize walls rather than roofs. In an era when congregations experimented with new worship formats and theological approaches, similar experimentation in religious building design made sense.

Variations and Vernacular

Religious architecture after World War II featured a wide range of styles. For example, congregations in Kansas in the 1940s and 1950s sometimes constructed buildings along Art Moderne lines. Buildings in this style featured limited ornament, flat roofs, and a horizontal appearance overall, often emphasized through horizontal stripes or

mullions. The style continued after World War II as well, showing up in Kansas in a number of buildings. One example was Wichita's Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church whose horizontal lines in brick and stonework was in the Art Moderne tradition.

Other 1950s religious structures in Kansas were the products of architects who had developed their own unique styles. The chapel of St. Benedict's Abbey in Atchison represents this trend. Although the main Abbey building dated from the 1920s, the chapel was part of a 1950s expansion project. Barry Byrne, a student of Frank Lloyd Wright, designed the chapel to be a vast space of brick and stone with narrow vertical windows separating the bays. The ceiling was flat and bore tiles of bold primary colors.



The chapel of St. Benedict's Abbey in Atchison was the product of Barry Byrne, a student of Frank Lloyd Wright whose other works included St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church in Kansas City, Missouri.

Salina's Sacred Heart Cathedral featured concrete cylinders that mirrored grain elevators. The interior and exterior had simple concrete walls with few decorations. The one exception was the relief of ordinary people walking toward the main doors. The effect was closer to New Deal-era work than the abstract designs popular in the 1950s.

Most congregations in Kansas could not afford to hire nationally renowned architects to design their buildings. Vernacular adaptations varied with the designer and resources. Sometimes a simple, utilitarian building sported a facade that looked modern to the people who commissioned the work, as in the case of the diamond motif on the front of Wichita's Calvary Assembly of God. In many cases, a new congregation constructed a modest brick or wooden building with a shallow-pitched roof until finances permitted a sanctuary of a more striking design. Many congregations constructed gable-roofed, rectangular buildings topped with a cross (the way the popular culture still suggested a church *should* look); yet they incorporated patterns of contrasting light and dark brick, colored glass panes in otherwise utilitarian windows, or stainless steel details to look more contemporary.

There were several reasons why such designs became commonplace. One was that both leading architectural and church magazines promoted the embrace of these new designs as an inevitable trend. Popular style books such as *Contemporary Church Art* and *Modern Church Architecture* reinforced this message, while liturgists discussed at length the need to adapt worship practices and worship space to present-day needs and ideas.

Many among the new generation of clergy got a heavy dose of Modern architecture from their seminaries. For example, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, a denomination usually known for its conservatism, gained national attention in architectural circles when Eero Saarinen's firm designed the chapel for its Concordia Seminary in Indiana.

The financial bottom line also contributed to the popularity of Modern design. Architects favored a simplicity that used relatively inexpensive, mass-produced building materials, to the delight of cost-conscious church leadership. Journals such as the *Architectural Forum* devoted whole sections on how prefabricated materials and innovative construction methods made possible buildings that were both aesthetically pleasing and relatively inexpensive to produce. Finally, many items of worship, from pews to pulpits, were available from supply stores that increasingly embraced the contemporary look. By the late 1950s, the trend away from revivalism was hard to avoid even if congregations wanted to.

Toward the Future?

During the 1950s, much attention was given to blending modern science with traditional faith. However, as the 1960s unfolded, innovation and change started to take society down uncertain and uncomfortable paths. The ideal of consensus among at least the mainline churches gave way to near civil wars over liturgy, ordination, and official church positions on everything from the war in Vietnam to desegregation. Demographic

(Above) Calvary Assembly of God in Wichita is a largely utilitarian building whose facade features a diamond pattern. It is one of the many ways that vernacular structures reflected the look of modern architecture after World War II.

(Right) Edward Schulte designed Salina's Sacred Heart Cathedral to reflect the look of grain elevators. The walls for both the inside and the outside feature the concrete of which they are made.

changes in suburbia and shrinking rural populations left congregations with declining numbers. Updated versions of traditional worship space may have appealed to the World War II generation; yet these attitudes did not have the same power for Baby Boomer youth who tended to favor either alternative religious traditions or evangelicalism. As the elder generations wrangled over theology and worship styles, the youth abandoned the pews that they were once expected to fill.

Starting in the mid-1960s, the national enthusiasm for church construction began to wane. "Let's Stop Building Cathedrals" exhorted an article in *The Christian Century. Christianity Today* warned that congregations were in danger of losing sight of the Gospel in favor of the idolatry of wanting more and more buildings. Moreover, vernacular adaptations of styles such as the International had become so commonplace they lost their edge. A design that seemed innovative and new in 1954 could look almost ordinary in 1964 with church after church using many of the same features. In particular, the overpowering roofs and soaring gables that were so daring and confident in the 1950s could seem overly optimistic a decade later.

Some structures had departed so far from traditional religious architecture that congregations sometimes complained that they did not feel like they were in church. What was supposed to be sacred space felt cold and impersonal, more like a supermarket or office building. The innovative designs that architects loved became the churches that many worshipers loved to hate. "They reminded me of chicken coops," remarked one colleague reflecting on the religious buildings of the era.

Even so, many new structures in the 1960s and 1970s still used popularized versions of designs that went back to the 1940s. Congregations that kept their older buildings "updated" the worship space by adding new furniture and interior decoration taken from national supply houses. By the late twentieth century, mainline congregations started to merge or move into newer buildings. Evangelical and Pentecostal denominations acquired the now vacant 1950s and 1960s-era structures to accommodate the needs of their growing numbers. Therefore, whether an International Style showpiece, an adaptation of Gothic Revival, a striking church in the round, or a vernacular hybrid of many styles, the tension between modern and traditional design in the twenty years after World War II left a powerful, lasting legacy on the ecclesiastical landscape of Kansas and the nation.

Suggested Readings

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